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Religions and Religious Space in Sogdian Culture: A View from Archaeological and Written Sources

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ABSTRACT

The surviving archaeological and ethnographic evidence and textual records represent Sogdiana as a diverse society composed of multiple religious groups. The primary evidence on the religious life of the Sogdians is the literature and material culture objects of their religions, including art and architecture. These pieces of material and textual evidence show the coexistence of various indigenous and “imported” religions and their forms of religiosity. The indigenous religion in Sogdiana was Zoroastrianism with a nature distinct from the Zoroastrianism practiced in Iran’s heartland. The “imported” religions were Manicheanism, Christianity and Buddhism. This “relaxed” character of the Sogdian religious milieu, as represented by the vast array of archaeological evidence, was probably conditioned by its political state and geographical position. First, Sogdiana was located beyond the territory of the influence of the “orthodox” Zoroastrianism practiced in Iran proper (Central/Western Iran). This is particularly manifested in variations of Sogdian Zoroastrian practices developed around various local deities — distinctively lacking a chief deity such as Ahuramazda. In addition, it is not known whether there existed the institutionalized office of the high priest in Sogdiana, which in Western Iran was part of the political structure. Second, the absence of centralized ideological control may also be posited to have contributed to the flourishing and acceptance of a variety of religions. Whereas in Iran proper the monarch determined the religious profile, Sogdiana, being ruled by several semi-autonomous rulers, did not possess a “state religion” of any kind. Of course, their ethnoreligious

identity, based on the the majority of the evidence available can be seen to be Zoroastrian, but Zoroastrianism was just one of the many religions followed by Sogdians. Nonetheless, religion undoubtedly was important to Sogdians and played a significant role in their culture and society as a whole.

The purpose of this article is to provide a compendium of important textual and archaeological evidence demonstrating the presence of a variety of religions and their “role and space” in Sogdian culture. The article is composed of two parts: the first part provides ethnographic information about Sogdians and their culture, and the second is devoted to a discussion of material and textual evidence concerning the various religions practiced by the Sogdians.

SURVEY OF SOURCES ON SOGDIANS AND SOGDIANA

Sogdiana was an ancient culture of Iranian-speaking people who lived at the edge of the Persian Empire on the route to China. More specifically, it encompassed the provinces of Samarqand, Bukhara and Qarshi in the modern republic of Uzbekistan and the Sughd province of the republic of Tajikistan.

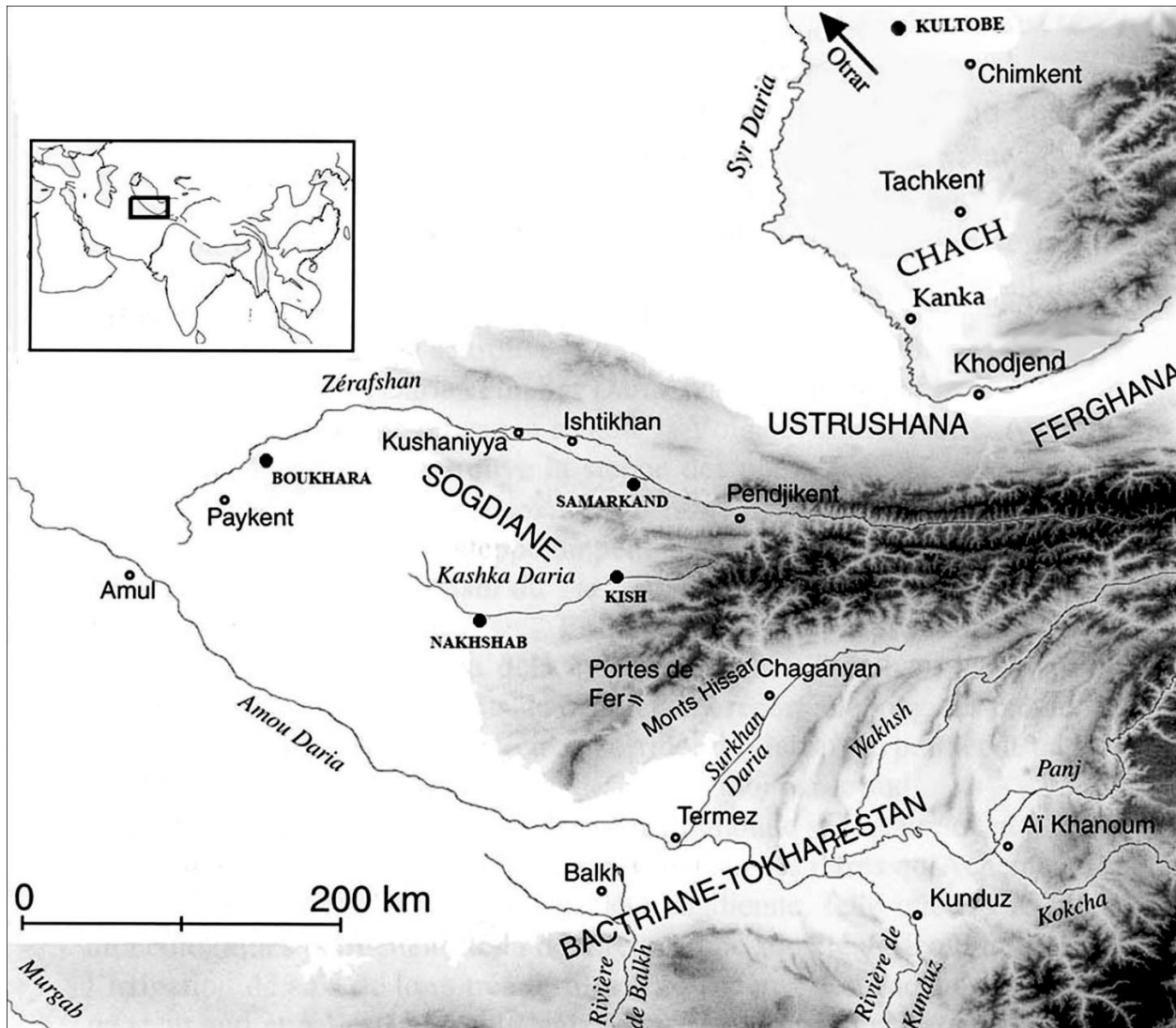


Figure 1. Map of Sogdiana and its major cities. After Grenet and Rapin 2013, Fig. 11

Although modern scholarship rediscovered Sogdian culture in the late nineteenth century, and its language became known in the early decades of the twentieth century, Sogdians were known to history from the Achaemenid Era (550–330 BCE), the oldest extant reference to Sogdiana, and there are mentions of them in the geographical-historical texts of tenth-century Arab authors. In particular, Sogdiana (Suguda) is mentioned in the tri-lingual (Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian) inscription of King Darius (Dārayavauš) at Behistun, which lists the twenty-three countries that were subject to his throne.

King Darius says: “These are the countries which are subject unto me, and by the grace of Ahuramazda I became king of them: Persia, Elam, Babylonia, Assyria, Arabia, Egypt, the countries by the Sea, Lydia, the Greeks, Media, Armenia, Cappadocia, Parthia, Drangiana, Aria, Chorasmia, Bactria, Sogdia, Gandara, Scythia, Sattagydia, Arachosia and Maka; twenty-three lands in all.”¹

Other Iranian sources mentioning Sogdiana include the Avesta Yt.10.14 where the word *Suyda* is used as a designation of both Sogdiana and Sogdians.² In addition, the compound *Suydo šayana* — meaning ‘the dwelling of Sogdians’ — is also attested (Vd.1, 4).³ Badresaman Gharib observes that “in both passages, *suyda* is closely associated with Gava, which has been taken as being the designation of ‘Sogdiana’ (Yt.10, 15).”⁴ The multilingual inscription of the Sassanid king, Shapur I (241–272 CE), written on the wall of Ka’ba-ye Zardošt at Naqš-e Rostam in Fars, following the model of Darius’ inscription, also lists Sogdiana “together with Kušan, Kāš, and Šš (Tashkent)” as one of his subjugated lands.⁵ Further, the name of Sogdiana “occurs in the Parthian and also in the Greek version of the inscription. Thus the Parthian version (line 2), reads, kwšn hšt(r) [H](N prh)š L pškbwr W HN L k’š swgd W šš [s....] m[rz]. The Greek version of the same inscription has *sōdikēnēs*.”⁶

However, whether the people who occupied the region of Sogdiana before its annexation to the Achaemenids and being named in their monumental inscriptions were Iranian-speaking or not remains obscure. The archaeological material reveals that the Iranian identity of the people living in Sogdiana (the Sogdians) had developed subsequent to the inclusion of the region in the Persian Empire. This probably happened after Cyrus the Great’s conquest ca. 540 BCE, which was marked by the

¹ Kent 1953, pp. 208–209.

² Christian 1904, entry 1582.

³ Christian 1904, entry 1582; Gershevitch 1959, p. 176.

⁴ Gharib 1969, p. 68.

⁵ Gharib 1969, pp. 67–68.

⁶ Gharib 1969, pp. 67–68.

establishment of Kyrèschata (Cyropolis) in Syr Darya.⁷ Thenceforth, as Pierre Briant has shown, Sogdiana remained a province of the Achaemenid Empire and its successor dynasties, being ruled by Greek-Macedonians and later by Iranian-speaking dynasties, including the Parthians and Sassanids.⁸

What can be concluded is that over and above any political subjectivity, the Achaemenid and Sassanid royal inscriptions indicate the socio-cultural affiliation of Sogdiana and its adjoining regions within the wider Iranian imperial context of that time. In other words, these inscriptions demonstrate the ethno-cultural as well as linguistic identity of Sogdiana as being an integral part of Iranian culture.

Several Greek works also mention Sogdiana (Σογδιανή). Particularly valuable among Greek sources is Strabo's *Geography*, which designates the geographical location of Sogdiana as being between the Oxus and the Jaxartes rivers.⁹ Additionally, he supplies valuable information about the demographic spread of the Sogdians and their language. He states that

...the name of Ariana is further extended to a part of Persia and of Media, as also to the Bactrians and Sogdians on the north; for these speak approximately the same language, with but slight variations.¹⁰

⁷ P'yankov 1993, pp. 514–515. The region that afterwards became known to the Achaemenids as Sogdiana was flourishing much earlier than the date of the Behistun inscriptions. This can be seen in evidence deriving from the earliest urban center of Sogdiana, the town of Sarazm (fourth–third centuries BCE), where agriculture and metallurgy were practiced. As Isakov 1996, pp. 1–13, has shown, the ceramic and other material culture of Sarazm connects it with the cultures of others in its immediate surrounding regions, like that of the Oxus as well as more distant ones such as Baluchistan. Another ancient urban center known in the archaeology of Sogdiana is Kōk Tepe, which is situated north of the Zarafšān River and dates approximately to the fifteenth century BCE. The earliest archaeological material of Kōk Tepe appears to go back to the Bronze Age. As Rapin 2007, pp. 29–72, has demonstrated, the Kōk Tepe culture lasted through the Iron Age and declined with the rise of Samarkand. Regarding the development and rise of Samarkand, Bernard 1996, pp. 334–337, has demonstrated that the city most likely received its first major fortification as an urban settlement under the Achaemenid administration.

⁸ Briant 2002, pp. 743–754.

⁹ Hamilton and Falconer 1903–1906, II, p. 73, XI, p. 516.

¹⁰ Hamilton and Falconer 1903–1906, II, p. 73, XI, p. 516.

Other Greek sources mentioning Sogdiana give either a brief geographical description or episodes related to the political history of the Persian Empire, of which Sogdiana was a part.¹¹

In Arabic historical-geographical writing of the ninth–eleventh centuries Sogdiana is designated by the generic term *Al Soghd* (الصغد) and is understood as a designation of both the region and the people in *Mā-warā'-al-nahr* ('what lies beyond the river').¹² The Arabic sources provide varied information regarding the cities and regions comprising Sogdiana. According to Ahmad al-Yaqubi, a ninth-century writer, in his famous *Kitab al-Buldan* (Book of the countries), Sogdiana included Keš, Nasaf and Samarqand. His list of the cities comprising Sogdiana excludes Bukhara. In addition, he designates both Samarqand and Keš as capital cities.¹³ The tenth-century writer Abu Ishaq al-Istakhri in his *Al-masaalik wa-al-mamaalik* (Traditions of countries) recorded that Sogdiana comprised regions located east of Bukhara from Dabusia to Samarqand. Al-Istakhri also pointed out that other authors include also Bukhara, Keš and Nasaf as principal cities of Sogdiana.¹⁴ In contrast to the abovementioned, Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī, the eleventh-century Chorasmian polymath, whose work has recorded information about the Sogdian calendar system but also about the Sogdian language, does not give any geographical designation of Sogdiana.¹⁵ Nevertheless, despite their inconsistencies as to which cities and regions constituted the Sogdian federation, the Arabic writings name the major Sogdian cities, such as Samarqand, Bukhara and Keš — that were the main “capital cities” of Eastern, Western and Southern Sogdiana.¹⁶

¹¹ Herodotus mentions Sogdiana as one of the satrapies of the Achaemenid Empire and speaks of Sogdiana in accounts of the Persian and Roman wars as supplying troops. Ptolemy, similarly to Strabo, describes the geography of Sogdiana.

¹² Barthold 1937, p. 473.

¹³ De Goeje 1938–3199, vol. 4; Krachkovskiy 1957.

¹⁴ De Goeje 1938–1939, vol. 1; Krachkovskiy 1957.

¹⁵ Sachau 1879, pp. 56, 220.

¹⁶ For this thought compare the text of Yaqubi and Istakhri in their descriptions of the *Al Sughd*. The texts are found in the editions by De Goeje 1938–1939, vol. IV, pp. 292–293; De Goeje 1938–1939, vol. 1, pp. 314, 316.

SOGDIANA: ETHNOCULTURAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL SURVEY

As an ethnic group, the Sogdians were an Eastern Iranian nation, whose language also was called Sogdian. According to the Sogdian literary sources, the Sogdians referred to themselves as *swγdyk*, *swγdy'nk* and *sywdyk*. Their language belongs to the eastern branch of the Middle Iranian language group.¹⁷

Most of the considerable written material in Sogdian is represented by the religious texts of Manicheans, Christians and Buddhists. These manuscripts were most probably produced between the ninth and thirteenth centuries (most likely reproduced from manuscripts of earlier centuries). The second largest quantity of written material in Sogdian is the group of "secular" texts comprising letters and juridical and legal documents that were discovered in the historical home of the Sogdians, whereas the other religious texts in Sogdian were chiefly found in Chinese territories. This corpus in scholarship is known as the Mūgh Documents — named after its find spot.

It is known that Sogdiana was neither an empire with a centralized state nor a society governed by one monarch. Instead, it appears to have been a federation of semi-autonomous principalities or city-states, each with a semi-independent ruler.¹⁸ The city of Samarqand was traditionally viewed as the capital of Sogdiana, with its ruler being "first among equals."¹⁹ The Sogdian city-states developed independently; their rulers were drawn from the local nobility, though they often "ow[ed] allegiance to a more powerful ruler" of other neighboring nations, such as China.²⁰ As Boris Marshak, pointing to Chinese sources, has noted: "[n]ot all rulers in Sogdia were hereditary. Two kings of Samarkand were 'chosen,' and in one case, the monarch was elected by the 'people of the state.'"²¹ Similarly, based on the study of Sogdian coinage and the use of *tamgas*²² in a broader comparative historical assessment,

¹⁷ Skjærvø 2006, pp. 503–504; Sims-Williams 1996.

¹⁸ For the most recent discussion on the political structure of Sogdiana, see Shenkar 2017, pp. 191–209.

¹⁹ Marshak 2001a, p. 231; Marshak 2001b, p. 13; Frye 1996, p. 185.

²⁰ Marshak 2001a, p. 231; Chavannes, 1903, pp. 135–136.

²¹ Marshak 2002, pp. 12–13.

²² The origin of the *tamgha* is generally connected with nomadic cultures. However, despite being studied systematically for

Aleksandr Naymark has demonstrated that the multiplicity and divergences in the use of *tamga* should not be evidence that they represent “family badges of various Sogdian ruling houses,” or dynasties, but rather that they symbolize individual city-states or polities; that is, the Sogdian *tamga* is attached to the political realm where the coin was struck.²³ Further, if one looks at the Arabic sources, it is evident that members of the Sogdian community, through their civic rights and authority, could install or depose their rulers. One such episode concerns the king of Samarkand, Tarkhūn, who, according to Ṭabarī, was removed from the throne of Samarkand, leading to his suicide.

The Soghdians said to Tarkhun, “You have been satisfied with humiliation, and you have deemed the [paying of] tax agreeable; you are an old man, and we have no need of you.” [‘Ali] said: They put Ghurak in charge and imprisoned Tarkhun. Tarkhun said, “There is nothing after being stripped of kingship other than being killed; I prefer that that should be by my [own] hand rather than that someone other than myself should take charge of it in respect of me”; and he leaned on his sword until it came out of his back.²⁴

Regarding the involvement of Chinese dynasties in the political situation in Sogdiana, two interesting episodes deserve to be noted here. The *Tang huiyao* 唐會要, in the description of the countries of Kang 康 (Samarqand) and Shi 史 (Kiśś – Keš), narrates that in the third year of the Xianqing 顯慶 era (658, after the Tang victory over the Western Turks), Emperor Gaozong sent a military

over a hundred years, there are still no definite answers as to the functions and semantics of *tamghas* in their multifaceted usage contexts (Yatsenko 2001, pp. 4–5). For example, in Sarmatian *tamgha* studies, the *tamgha* is defined as a property mark, though its varied functions are also stressed. Ella Solomonik (1959, pp. 210–218) defined their function as property marks burned on animals’ skins, while other scholars emphasized the function of a *tamgha* as a “hallmark” for valuable goods and household items. On the other hand, some other comparative studies of *tamghas* stressed their multifunctionality: zodiac sign, charms or amulets, a property mark, a political emblem used to mark borders, or in flags as a “clan/dynasty” symbol, and animal earmarks (Yatsenko 2001, pp. 8–9, 14). Sogdian *tamghas* can be viewed as the legacy of the close socio-cultural and economic-political contacts of the Sogdians with their nomadic-pastoralist neighbours, as demonstrated by Gyul, 2005; Naymark, 2005, p. 226.

²³ Naymark 2005, pp. 225–231.

²⁴ Hinds 1990, p. 176

commander named Dong Jisheng 董寄生 to these two countries and appointed the respective sovereigns as Chinese (nominal) vassals. It is believed that the first Sogdian vassal appointed by the Tang administration was Varkhuman (Avarumān), the king of Samarqand. A more interesting piece of information is included in another section of the same work, according to which “since the Western Regions had been completely pacified, the emperor sent envoys separately to Samarkand as well as to Tokhāristān and the other countries [of those regions] to inquire about their costumes and products as well as the institutions past and present, to draw illustrations and present [the results of the inquiry to the throne].” The precise date for this event in the collection of documents from the period Tang *huiyao* (唐會要, 1998, 99.1774, 1777; 36.656) is given as 14 June 658 CE.²⁵

The local Sogdian ruling nobility, as attested by Sogdian coins and literary records, bore the titles of *ekšīd* (ʾxšyδ) and *afšīn*.²⁶ The title *ekšīd*, however, had been designated more commonly in Sogdian numismatic material by the Aramaic ideogram MLKʾ — ‘king.’ On the other hand, the use of another Aramaic ideogram, MRʾY, on coinage and texts is usually understood to be the equivalent of *afšīn* ‘lord’ or ‘sovereign.’ The title MLKʾ in Mūgh documents Nov 3 and Nov 4 is used as a title of Tarkhūn *trxwn MLKʾ 10 srδ ʾz mʾxy msβwyycy myδ ʾsmʾn* — ‘it was the tenth year of (the reign of) king Tarkhūn.’²⁷ Similarly, the title of the Dēwāštīč, the last king of Sogdiana, as attested in Mūgh documents, was *sywδyk MLKʾ smʾrknδc MRʾY* — ‘king of Sogd, lord of Samarkand.’²⁸ A further example of this designatory word is found in relation to the king of Vaghd attested in the document from the Mūgh collection *βγtyk MLKʾ pncy MRʾY* — “the king of Vaghd and sovereign of Panch.”²⁹ However, the title of *afšīn*, based on its attestation on coins and texts, was commonly born by the rulers of Osrušana. The political administrative posts of medieval Sogdiana can be reconstructed from the titles indicated in the Sogdian texts from Qalʾa-i Mūgh, which comprises legal and commercial documents.³⁰ Another important

²⁵ See also Stark 2009, pp. 8–10.

²⁶ Smirnova 1970, pp. 22–23; Frye 1996, p. 195.

²⁷ Livshits 2015, p. 27.

²⁸ Livshits 1962, p. 56.

²⁹ Livshits 2015, p. 40.

³⁰ Livshits 2015.

administrative title found in the mentioned texts is that of *pr'm'nδ'r*, ‘framāndār,’ which, based on the its context, can be translated as ‘manager, steward,’ or in literature as someone who ‘implements or holds the orders,’ a compound of *pr'm'n* + *δ'r*. We know of at least one such officeholder, *pr'm'nδ'r wtt*, Ūt framāndār, whose office, as pointed out by Michael Shenkar, was “the highest administrative authority in the Panjikent region during the reign of Dhēwāshtīch (705?–722).”³¹ The Sogdian marriage contract in the Mūgh collection names a certain Wakhushukān, son of Varkhumān, bearing the title *xwyšt*, in whose presence the contract was signed.³² Aaron Livshits translates this title as “chief,” based on its etymological root in the Avestan *huuōišta*, meaning ‘supreme, first, senior,’ but in the other occurrence of the same title, in document B1, he translated it as ‘a manager of the settlement.’³³ The variability in the meaning of this word cannot be justified based on the modern understanding of the title; however, it is clear that the use of different words in civic titles in seventh-century Sogdiana conveyed their own distinctions. Aside from becoming aware of the lexical diversity of such titular words in Sogdian, what we learn is that there were people actively engaged in civic administration and that their responsibilities included both legal and local governing duties. In the above example of *xwyšt* we see a person in the civil court and also in a certain county administration office.

There is another administrative title found in these documents that belongs to the Turkic language: it appears in a letter sent by Dēwāštīč, from Mūgh collection A16, but also in a few other texts, for example, B2, and B15,³⁴ where a certain Qis bearing the title *ryttypyr* ‘eltābār’ is mentioned. This word from Old Turkish means ‘commander’ or ‘regional chieftain.’³⁵ It is important to note that this title is also attested in the seventh–eighth-centuries coins of Čač, for example, *pný tk' ryttypyr c'cynk γwβw*, ‘coin of *tegin eltābār*, lord of Čač.’³⁶

An honorific title by which the officials are regularly addressed in Sogdian texts is *xwβ*, *xwβw* or

³¹ Shenkar 2020, p. 381.

³² Livshits 2015, p. 22

³³ Livshits 2015, p. 34

³⁴ The same title in the form of *dyttypyr*.

³⁵ DTS 1969, p. 171.

³⁶ Babayarov 2007, pp. 42, 48–49.

the phrasal noun $\beta\gamma w xw\beta w$. Both $xw\beta$ and $xw\beta w$ mean 'lord' and in the compound form used as an address formula this is understood to be 'lord and sovereign.' One of the best examples of this is a salutation formula of the B16 text wherein all these expressions are found.³⁷ The meaning of 'lord' in Sogdian Christian texts is given by the word $xwtw$, used both in connection with 'God,' for example, $xwtw by$, and Jesus, $xwt'w yšwy$ 'Lord Jesus.' The term $xwtw$ occurs with different spellings: $xwt'w$ and $xwd'w$. Regarding the use of $xwtw$ (including its other spelling variations) in Sogdian Christian texts, Martin Schwartz points out that it always translates the Syriac word *mry* as 'Lord.'³⁸ With regard to the administrative offices in the ruling areas of Sogdiana, there are at least three titles known from the Mūgh documents; these are 'village elder' $kty'\betašws$, 'steward or community liaison person' $'rspn$ 'steward or liaison person's assistant' $'pš'rspn$. These titles are mentioned in the letters and commercial documents and, based on their contexts, it can be inferred that these official positions in the administration were important. Those holding these titles had communal and bureaucratic responsibilities. The general picture of the documentary evidence informs shows that in Sogdiana there was a well-defined administration system with a hierarchal order.

The polity being located on fertile river basins, the basis of the Sogdian economy was agriculture. The lands were irrigated through artificial canals connected to the Zarafšān or Syr Darya rivers. Accordingly, the land-owning aristocracy, known as *dihqāns*, had the leading part in the Sogdian hierarchy. As demonstrated in Ol'ga Smirnova's study of Sogdian socio-economic life, the following social strata: $'ztkr$ ('nobility'), $\gamma w'kr$ ('merchants') and $k'rykr$ ('workers') were the chief players in the local economy.³⁹

Furthermore, "there was an institution peculiar to Central Asia, especially in Sogdiana, that of the *chakar* — military slave or servant."⁴⁰ De la Vaissière considers that these *chakars* were "professional" military personal who were recruited for positions related to defense and the army, such as a personal

³⁷ Livshits 2015, p. 103.

³⁸ Schwartz 1967.

³⁹ Smirnova 1970, pp. 38–68.

⁴⁰ Frye 1996, p. 194; Smirnova 1970, pp. 22–24. Vaissière 2003, pp. 23–27.

defense squad or militia.⁴¹ On the role of the *chakars* in the broader context of the social institution of medieval Sogdiana, emphasizing the roles and functions of the civic institutions, Michael Shenkar further has noted that:

The very fact that the *čākars* were personal armies of private individuals fits the decentralization of Sogdian political organization and the much greater role played by individuals in the political and social affairs of the Sogdian city-states than in any other neighbouring society. Like the abundance of rich and expensive decorative elements in the households of affluent Sogdian citizens unparalleled elsewhere, the emergence and the expansion of the institution of the *čākars* was determined by the competition for power and prestige within civic communities in which every prominent and wealthy member of the *nāf* could participate.⁴²

“Monopolies” of various economies, such as land, market, property, etc., were controlled by the nobility or *dihqāns*. Land and other assets owned by the nobility, such as mills and workshops, were rented to the “landless” farmers, *ktyβrs*, or to craftsmen who also cultivated land.⁴³ Based on the above discussion of the semantic variations of the *xwyšt* and *pr’m’nd’r*, it may be possible to assume that these various forms of civic and economic transaction were monitored and managed by those holding these offices in both large cities and remote settlements.

In addition to agriculture, the Sogdian economy depended on trade, both local and long-distance. While the origins of Sogdian trade cannot be pinpointed precisely, it is thought that their commercial activities extended as far back as the Achaemenid Era.⁴⁴ Part of the difficulty in ascertaining the origins of Sogdian commerce is that it can only be gleaned in part from the Sogdian sources, but is mainly understood from the information supplied by sources in Chinese or other languages, including

⁴¹ Vaissière 2005b, pp. 139–149.

⁴² Shenkar, 2020, p. 382.

⁴³ Smirnova 1970, pp. 102–103, 112–114.

⁴⁴ Vaissière 2005a, pp. 20–24.

the material culture products of Sogdian provenance discovered in various regions.⁴⁵ The only Sogdian text containing some information on the commercial activity of Sogdians, particularly in China, is 'Letter II' of the so-called collection of Ancient Letters datable to 313 CE. As Étienne de la Vaissière has said about this particular letter:

[it] is one of the only documents proving the existence of a Sogdian *network*, and not simply an aggregate of petty Sogdian merchants, with all that the notion of network implies in terms of an economic and social structure intended to control commercial operations at a distance.⁴⁶

In discerning the diverse aspects of Sogdian society from socioeconomic and cultural perspectives, trade and migration play important role. Economic exchanges led Sogdians into wider interactions with other ethnic groups representing different languages, cultures and religions. Close relationships with pastoralist, sedentary communities and those involved in trade and diplomacy provided Sogdians with opportunities of expansion and influence. One of the central aspects of their activities, in addition to being exceptional merchants, was their role as cultural agents facilitating the transfer and transmission of religious and cultural products across the Central Asian landmass.

SOGDIANA: RELIGIONS AND RELIGIOUS SPACE

As demonstrated in a recent study by Michael Shenkar, in the fifth–eighth centuries the socio-political structure of Sogdian society had a significant role in the development of religious life such that it could

⁴⁵ One of the frequently mentioned episodes is that recorded in *New Tang History*: "Men of Sogdiana have gone wherever profit is to be found." Pulleyblank 1952, p. 317). The other tall stories about Sogdian traders or their skills mentioned in Chinese records are those cited by Watson 1993, p. 553: "Anecdotes were rife on the Sogdians' sharpness: that at birth honey was put in their mouths and gum on their hands, that they learned the trade from the age of five, that on reaching their twelfth year they were sent to do business in a neighboring state."

⁴⁶ Vaissière 2005, p. 43.

be said that “the city-state was the centre of the Sogdian religious life.”⁴⁷ Approaching the religions of the Sogdians from the method proposed by Shenkar opens new possibilities to understanding the presence and evolution of religious belief and practices and their contribution to forming and developing significant social-religious contexts.

Religious practice was fundamental to the formation of common and individual spaces. These spaces were either occupied by and devoted to a single religion, or were spaces shared between several religions. The city as a whole can be regarded as a shared space of which parts were occupied by individual religions (e.g., religious architecture and burial grounds), as the sole space devoted to that religion. In addition, religions required production spaces, such as workshops for making cult objects, etc.

There were “physical-real” spaces where these religions were displayed and acknowledged through their ritual performance and customs. These were temples or shrines located in public spaces and also private chapels in individual homes. In addition, there were “physical-invisible” spaces where these religions were exhibited. Among this group of spaces, one can include the geoscapes where the religions were practiced or known; these places were given names echoing the names of various divinities or possibly a once-existing temple or shrine dedicated to them.⁴⁸ These toponyms were physical but functioned by providing “thought images” of the religions and pantheons that were attached to physical landmarks. Hearing these names or referring to these places ultimately invoked religious and spiritual sentiments that linked the name with not just a place but also lived personal experiences. Further, in the shared public space one can include the workshops producing inventories of religious products such as ceramic icons depicting deities or ossuaries decorated with motifs communicating religious rituals and beliefs.

As shown by Marshak, the role of religions and religiosities present among Sogdians can be traced in multiple artistic domains.⁴⁹ Indeed, one of the best demonstrations of the role and significance of “spiritual culture” in Sogdiana is the body of wall murals and other artistic products,

⁴⁷ Shenkar 2017, pp. 191–209.

⁴⁸ Smirnova, 1971, pp. 90–108.

⁴⁹ Marshak 1999, pp. 175–192.

dated between the fifth and eighth centuries. The wall murals have been discovered in houses, temples and palaces in various principalities of Sogdiana. Many of these murals depict religious motifs, including fables and tales that were part of the "religious communications" current within various faith communities.⁵⁰ Symbols of religions and rituals were also expressed in the decorations on ceramic objects for a variety of uses, terracotta icons depicting various divinities and the ossuaries used in burial customs. The iconography of some ossuaries and ceramic objects depicts the various divinities and divine beings that were current in the medieval Sogdian religious milieu.⁵¹ In addition, the existence of various religions and religious practices among Sogdians is proved by the diverse body of religious texts of these religions. All religious texts known in Sogdian today were found outside the Sogdiana heartland in the "Sogdiana diaspora." Considering the fact that close relationships, both at the family level and through trade partnerships, were maintained by the members of the Sogdian diaspora and those in their homeland, it is possible to assert that these religious texts may also have been known and been in use in Sogdiana proper at some point. Marshak observes that merchants, immigrants and missionaries were the social groups chiefly responsible for the introduction of the world religions into Sogdiana; leaving a communal faith in Sogdiana proper by converting to other religions was rather a rare occurrence. Accordingly, being members of the diaspora and under the civic and administrative laws and regulations of other countries made it possible for Sogdians to convert and further paved a way for them to contextualize and served as a means to become part of the local societies.⁵² These observations by Marshak, especially with regard to Buddhism, are subject to material proof deriving from Semirechye and Chinese territories. As for traces of Buddhism in Sogdiana proper today, these are chiefly represented by a bronze statue of the Bodhisattva Avolkitesvara from Samarkand,⁵³ one painted representation of the Buddha from a reception room of a private dwelling, a terracotta mold for making

⁵⁰ One of the fundamental works on the topic of the religious and esoteric elements in Sogdian Art is Marshak 2002, where the author has provided a detailed survey and analysis of more than forty illustrative murals excavated over the last fifty years in the site of Panjikent, one of the important medieval Sogdian cities.

⁵¹ Marshak 1999, pp. 175–192.

⁵² Marshak 1999, p. 187.

⁵³ Karev 1998, pp. 108–117.

a Buddha icon and — the most recent discovery — a carved wooden panel depicting the adoration of the Buddha dating to a period not later than the first quarter of the eighth century, from the site of ancient Panjikent.⁵⁴

A painting of the Buddha from Panjikent offers a unique example demonstrating the shared space and inter-confessional nature of the spaces where religions and social ideas were represented and practiced. This is a wall mural that was discovered during the excavation of room 28 in Sector XXV, in Panjikent. The composition presents a seated Buddha with a standing devotee depicted at his left, dressed in Indian garments, with a flower in his hand. The composition was placed inside an arch drawn above the entrance door of a banquet hall richly decorated with murals. The mural, based on its representational features, has been described as being “the work of an artist with a limited knowledge of Buddhist art.”⁵⁵ In addition, as remarked upon by Marshak “[t]here is no doubt that neither the house owner nor the artist was Buddhist, which is evidenced both by some gross iconographic errors and the modest place that was allotted to the Buddha composition.”⁵⁶

The aspect of the mural important for this paper’s inquiry is not the artistic quality and features of the painting, but what the painting ‘does’ and its context in the richly ornamented room where there are also depictions of other divinities and ‘divinized humans,’ including scenes from epic stories. First of all, this depiction was not inserted in the composition of the room by accident. The mural does not occupy a large space, but rather its importance is indicated by its placement on the top of the arched doorway—where people entering the room would see it immediately. Prompted by theories concerning the social production of space and how such space functions, I argue that this painting creates a space within a space. And although it does not speak to the artistic familiarity of the owner of the dwelling or the artist, it nevertheless would evoke and represent meaning to a Buddhist guest or other visitors of that region. The Buddha is shown seated in a crossed leg position, and this body language is harmonized with the position of other depicted deities. Every image in this mural occupies and represents a unique

54 Marshak and Raspopova 1990, pp. 123–176; Marshak and Raspopova 1997/98, pp. 297–305; Kurbanov and Lurje 2017, pp. 268–277.

55 Compareti 2008, pp. 13–14.

56 Marshak and Raspopova 1990, p. 153.

set of religious experiences and ideas, and together the space they form can be designated a religious dialogue space.



Figure 2. Painted representaion of Buddha, enlarged. Reproduced from Marshak and Raspopova 1990

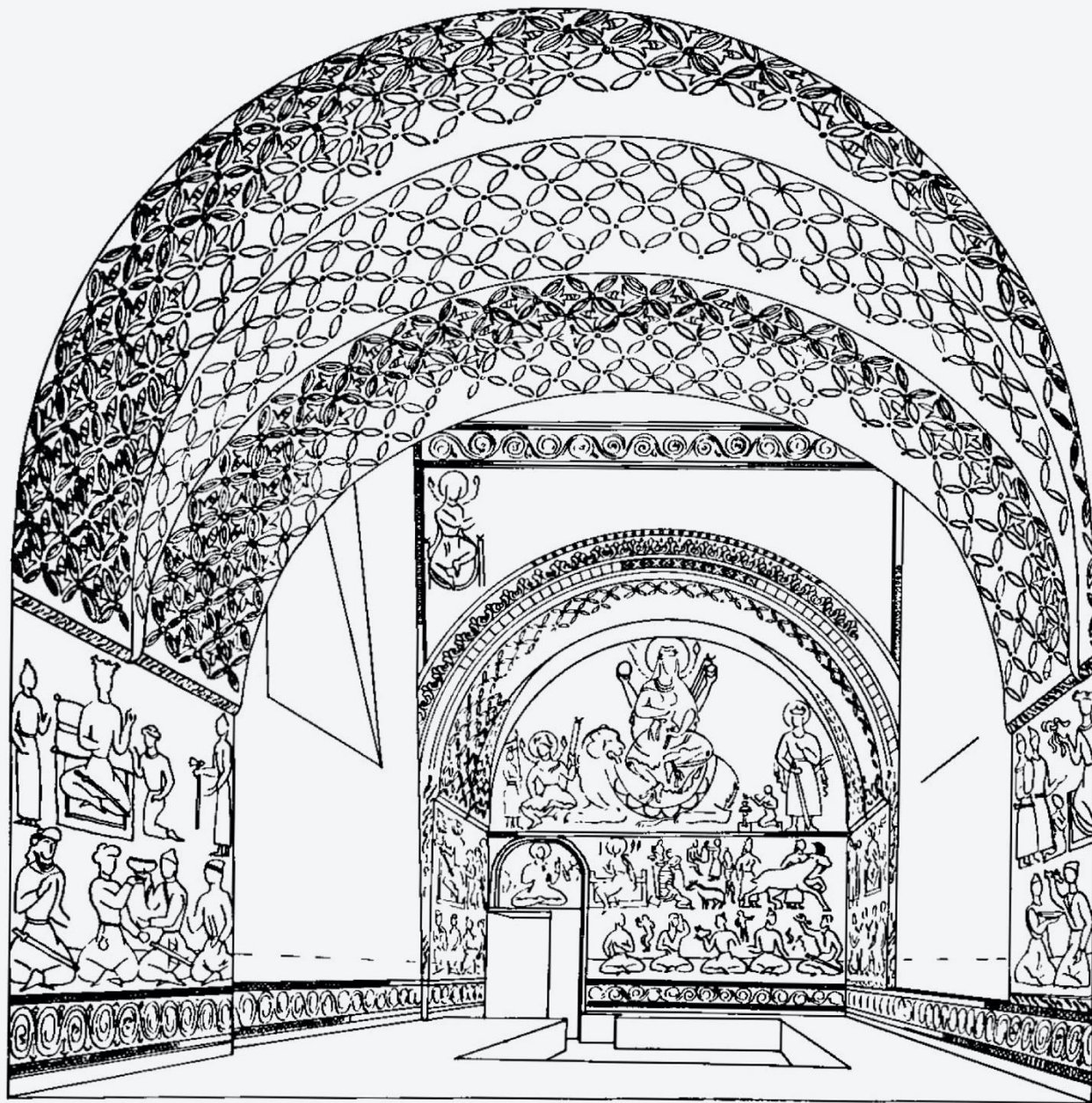


Figure 3. The painting in the context of the room where it was found

Instead, the numerous Sogdian Buddhist texts discovered in Chinese Turkestan, combined with records of the Chinese chronicles and archaeological evidence, all seem to indicate the dominant presence of Buddhism amongst Sogdians living in the diaspora. For example, the colophons of some Sogdian Buddhist manuscripts mention the names of the places where they were produced, for instance

that text P.2 indicates it was being copied in Chang'an, while the P.8 was copied at Dunhuang.⁵⁷ And there is ample evidence proving the presence of significant Sogdian communities across the western regions of China. This is also true for the Sogdian communities that lived in Semirechye, primarily manifested through "Buddhist" material culture, including architectural remains and coroplastic and epigraphic materials. This evidence was mainly discovered in Sogdian settlements in Semirechye, notably at the sites of Aq-Beshim (ancient Sūyāb) and Krasnaya Rechka.⁵⁸

In view of the ethnic background of its believers and its sociocultural affinity with the Iranian ecumene, Zoroastrianism can be regarded as a "national faith" for Sogdians. However, as recently discussed by Shenkar, in light of the sociopolitical and religious peculiarities current in medieval Sogdiana one can also use an attribute like Sogdian religion.⁵⁹ It is notable that, in the ancient written heritage that has come down to us from the Iranian-speaking peoples of the Central Asian landmass, embracing Bactrian, Sogdian and Khotanese, Zoroastrian literature survives only in Sogdian, albeit in a very fragmentary state. The most important Sogdian textual evidence is the Zoroastrian prayer, the *Ašem Vohu*, now held at the British Library (Or. 8212/84 (Ch.00289)).⁶⁰ This fragment narrates the story of Zoroaster's paying homage to an unnamed *βγ'n MLK* 'the king of gods,' who, based on the qualitative attributes that he bears in the text, such as *šyr'nk''rd δ'tkr* 'beneficent law-maker,' *δ'tnm'n* 'justly deciding' and *δ't* 'judge,' and also as the text states that the time Zoroaster approached this deity was in *'β'ysty γwpw 'δδβγ 'wyh βwδ'nt'k rwyšn'γrδmnyh prw šyr'kw šm'r'kh* 'was in the fragrant paradise in good thought.' These attributive designations clearly show that the deity described is Ahuramazda, the chief deity of the Zoroastrian religion. The most intriguing aspect of this text, however, is the opening sentence, containing these phrases:

57 Tremblay 2007, 91. For assessment of the research on Buddhism in Central Asia, including bibliography references to the existing literature, see Litvinsky 2001, pp. 188–199.

58 Further detailed analysis of Buddhism among Sogdians can be found in Chavannes 1903, p.135; Mkrtychev 2002, pp. 56–64. For Buddhism among Sogdians in China and other regions, see Walter 2006, pp. 1–66; Zhang 2002, pp. 75–79.

59 Shenkar 2017, pp. 194–195.

60 Sims-Williams 1976.

mwššt myšt'y wšt'y wšt'y
 štwxm'y twrt'y 'xwšt'yrtm.

As Nicholas Sims-Williams has shown:

If we lay this out in three lines (ignoring the faulty word-division), restore the missing letters at the beginning of the first word, and insert a couple of letters apparently lost by haplography, we obtain a text which can be directly compared with that of the Avestan prayer:

['rt] m{wx} wxštmyš'y ašəm vohū vahištəm astī
 wšt'ty wšt'y' štwxm' uštā astī uštā ahmāi
 y twrt'y 'xwšt'yrtm hyaṭ ašāi vahištāi ašəm"⁶¹

Righteousness is the best good
 [and it] is happiness.
 Happiness [is] to him, who [is] righteous
 for the sake of the best righteousness.

This reconstruction confirms that this manuscript contains one of the four great Zoroastrian prayers: Ašəm vohū, Ahuna vairyo, Yeīhē hātəm and Airyō'mā išyō.⁶² The other significant aspects of this manuscript are that the date (age) of the manuscript is "at least 300 years older than any surviving Avestan manuscript,"⁶³ of which the oldest is K7, containing Vispered dates from 1288 CE, and the second aspect is that "the text is neither a Sogdian translation of the Avestan text, nor a translation of the text

⁶¹ Sims-Williams 2000, pp. 6–8.

⁶² Schlerath, "Ašəm Vohū," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, II/7, p. 741, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/asem-vohu-the-second-of-the-four-great-prayers> (accessed on May, 11, 2017).

⁶³ Sims-Williams 2000, pp. 7–8.

as it was codified in Sasanian times."⁶⁴ The existence of such important textual evidence, which may have been preserved from the Achaemenid Era or even earlier, shows strong historical continuity of not only the Zoroastrian religion, but also of the existence of institutionalized liturgical- and ritual-based practices. And of course, the practices are shown in the material culture and the architectural evidence as well, which are mentioned below.

Of course, concerning Zoroastrianism among Sogdians and other ethnic groups of the Central Asia, one can find information in other external sources as well. For example, in Arabic sources one can find specific information about *majūš*, i.e. Magians or Fire Worshipers, and about temples of either *bayt al-asnām*, 'idol temples,' or *bayt al-asnām wa-l-nūr ān*, 'idol and fire temples.'⁶⁵ Image or idol temples may have existed among Iranians from the Achaemenid period, called **bagina*- 'place of the god(s)' (formed from *bag*) and its derivatives in Middle Persian *bašn*, Sogdian *bayn*, and the cognate Bactrian *bagolaggo*, possibly from Old Iranian **baga-dānaka*. In subsequent ages these image temples in Iran proper were gradually converted into "solo" fire temples but continued as the main type of temple in Central Asia. The idols in the Zoroastrian temple of Sogdiana, and equally in other parts of Central Asia, were kept in niches in the temple walls or on low pedestals on the floors. In Panjikent temples, the presence of niches for keeping the idols is observed from the fifth century. Based on the archaeological evidence, these statues of deities (idols) were "mobile" and "stationary," as exemplified by such statues as that of a female deity made from alabaster found in room 11 of the Temple II in Panjikent.⁶⁶ Another example of the "mobile" deities is the wooden statue of a male deity discovered in Kuhi Surkh; the figure held an incense burner on his hand while in the "sitting on throne" position.⁶⁷ This particular find suggests that there were images of deities kept in private citizens' homes as household gods.

From the Arabic sources, particularly important information is found in *Ātār al-bāqīa* by Abū

⁶⁴ Sims-Williams 2000, pp. 8–9.

⁶⁵ An example of such a designation for temples can be seen in al-Balādhurī's *Kitāb al-Buldān*; see De Goeje 1866, pp. 16–17, 241.

⁶⁶ Shkoda 2009, p. 99.

⁶⁷ Yakubov 1988.

Rayhān al-Bīrūnī, the eleventh-century Chorasmian polymath.⁶⁸ Bīrūnī in this book has recorded information about the Zoroastrian calendar system used by Chorazmians and Sogdians, including their festivals and religious practices. However, in contrast with such written sources, the most abundant evidence on Zoroastrianism in Sogdiana or among Sogdians is provided by archaeology. As Frantz Grenet has pointed out:

[A]t present, twenty-three (or twenty-four) of the thirty gods worshipped in the Zoroastrian calendar and regular prayers (Āfrīnagān) have been identified in Sogdian art. This list comprises all the Zoroastrian gods known on Kushan coins, except (given the present state of documentation) Wād and Wanind. The additions are: Four Aməša Spəntas (MP Amahraspandān: Ardwhišt, Spandarmad, Hordād, Amurdād), four deities linked with the afterlife (Srōš — named on the Rabatak inscription but not shown on Kushan coins — Rašn, Dēn, and the collective body of the Frauuašis), Apam Napāt (on whom see below), Anāhitā (on a few occasions depicted separately from Nana), and possibly also Xwaršēd, the Sun as distinct from Mithra. This list will probably be supplemented by future discoveries. Images are to be found in a great variety of media including wall paintings, wooden statues, self-standing small terracotta figures, images stamped on ossuaries (but never coins, contrary to the situation in the Kushan Empire).⁶⁹

And of course, Sogdians have practiced their Zoroastrian faith in the diaspora as well and maintained rich religious practices centered on their deities. Information about the temple practices of Sogdian Zoroastrians in China “can be inferred from two Chinese testimonies, namely a description of a Dunhuang “temple” mentioning “twenty niches” painted with images of gods in the local Sogdian

⁶⁸ Sachau 1879, pp. 56, 220.

⁶⁹ Grenet 2015, p. 134.

temple, and the Dunhuang manuscripts from c. 900 CE that record monthly allocations of thirty paper sheets "to paint the Zoroastrian (xian) gods."⁷⁰



Figure 4. Sogdian ossuary depicting Nana and Tīr-Tištīria. Reproduced from Grenet 2015, p. 136

In Sogdiana, as of today there are four identifiably Zoroastrian temples, where the cult of fire-worship is evident, that have been discovered. These are:

1. The Temple of Kanka near the citadel of the rulers of Čač, the closest area (in terms of distance) over which Sogdians began to spread their socio-cultural influence (late fifth–early sixth centuries CE). Čač was the last frontier of the kingdom of Šāpūr I (241–272 CE), which was named in his inscription on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt at Naqš-e Rostam.⁷¹ In the ruins of this temple, at the site of Kanka, horse skeletons were found, which has been interpreted as being related to

⁷⁰ Grenet 2015, p. 134, citing Grenet and Zhang 1996 [1998].

⁷¹ Examination of the inscription is found in Maricq 1958, pp. 295–360.

the New Year sacrifice to the souls of the royal ancestors. According to the archaeologists this particular ceremony has been reflected in Chinese sources on the religious practices of Sogdians.⁷²

2. The temple of Jartepa near Samarqand in a location called Varaghsar.⁷³ This temple functioned between the fourth and eighth centuries and disclosed archaeological evidence in many ways similar to that discovered at the temples of Panjikent. Some of the rooms in the Jartepa temple were also covered with wall paintings. In one of the rooms, for example, a painting showing Nana and Tīr-Tištīia engaged in a hunt was discovered.⁷⁴ Objects related to the religious practice discovered in Jar-tepe temples include: silver furnishings possibly for a small fire-altar or an incense burner and a bronze mace with a depiction of a human head. This particular object finds it parallel in contemporary ceremonial objects of the Parsi community, namely the bull-headed mace-varza (*gurz*).
3. Two temples discovered in the ancient Panjikent city, of which one is considered to be an image temple, i.e. one in which the idols were kept and worshiped. However, as V. Shkoda has shown, in the second phase of its functioning (end of fifth or early sixth century) it became a fire temple. The architectural examination reveals that the central structure in this temple was expanded by a series of rooms built alongside the main platform. One of these rooms was a four-columned fire-chamber with a central fire-altar made of clay, flanked by a prayer room with a water container for ablutions. A staircase was discovered to have existed on the edge of the temple platform, which provided direct communication between the *ātešgāh* 'fire room' and the main building. This meant that in Sogdiana there was a possible ritual connection between the two forms of cult, "idol" and "fire," and V. Shkoda postulates that embers of the sacred fire were brought in front of the "idols."⁷⁵

⁷² Bogomolov and Buryakov 1995.

⁷³ Berdimuradov and Samibaev 1992; Berdimuradov and Samibaev 1999.

⁷⁴ Grenet 2010, pp. 270–271, fig. 9b, pp. 10, 11.

⁷⁵ Shkoda 2009, pp. 27–32, 99–108.

For evaluating the Zoroastrian religion in Sogdiana, as well as the rituals and ceremonies held during local expressions of the religion, the temples of Panjikent provide the most valuable information. These temples, among all other religious architecture discovered so far in Sogdiana, are the most extensively studied (commenced in 1947). In addition to multiple publications in Russian and other languages, both specifically on the temples and other archaeological observations, the most comprehensive literature on these temples is Valentin Shkoda's *The Temples of Pendjikent and the Problems of Sogdian Religion (V–VIII centuries)*. These temples were built contemporary to the foundation of the city of Panjikent and have remained in service until the fall of the city before the Arabs in 722 CE. Of one of these temples, designated by the archaeologists as "Temple II" on the basis of its wall decoration and the small clay figurines found in its territory, it has been suggested that it was a temple dedicated to Nana. On the other hand, "Temple I" may have had a fire sanctuary used for a short period. In addition, the depiction of the Nana enthroned in the next-door temple is not seen in any of the murals of this temple. However, the identifiable deities depicted on the mural belong to the Avestan pantheon, for example, Mithra, who was one of the central deities in the Sogdian religious system.

Such decorative elements as wall murals and statues in Sogdian temples were used widely and, as Shkoda has shown, the temples of Panjikent were not exclusionary, and decorations are observed from all six periods of the functioning of these temples.⁷⁶ These murals depict deities and varied ritual scenes, including hunting and war scenes.

⁷⁶ Shkoda 2009, pp. 70–76.



Figure 5. Ritual ceremony. Panjikent temple (Shkoda 2009, 252)

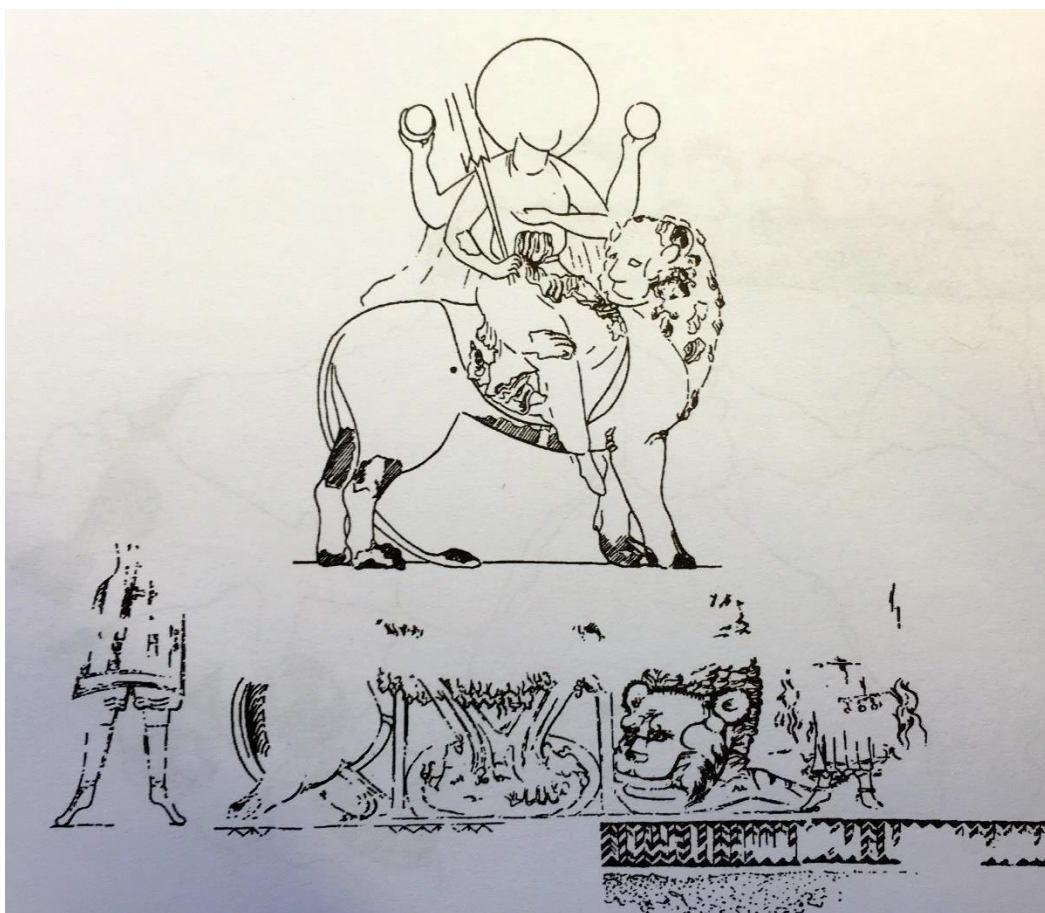


Figure 6. Deity riding on a lion. Panjikent temple (Shkoda 2009, 256)

In addition, there were also lots of objects, such as jewelry, coins, beads, and metallic objects, found in the temples, which testify to its popularity among the populations who brought these “votive offerings” into the temple treasury.⁷⁷ In particular, among the most interesting objects discovered are the bases of columns that stood in the courtyard.¹⁸ These column bases, executed in the Hellenistic style, coupled with two cups made in the Elephantine style, are among remains from a much older temple, which were brought here when the Panjikent temples were built.⁷⁷ And among other discoveries, there are multiple objects older than the date of the establishment of the temples. This, of course, is witness to the long-established temple culture in Sogdiana.

In the context of the archaeological evidence (small material culture objects and architectural

⁷⁷ Shkoda 2009, p. 86.

edifices), one of the primary questions to be addressed is their “functional context.” One aspect of the answer is to understand the role of the rituals in shaping the material culture, because the “functional space” for the material artifacts and the manner of construction of the structures had to accommodate a specific ritual system, either centered in worship of fire or idols. The important evidence is provided by Panjikent Temple I, the temple of Eternal Fire. The ritual in this temple meant certain adjustments had to be made in the structure, such as providing that the entrance to the room was positioned at the end of the hall so that from outside people would not be able to see the Eternal Fire: getting to see it was possible only by circling the room.⁷⁸ But the rituals and worship were not limited to the “public space,” i.e. city temples alone. Archaeological examples from Gardani Hisor, Qum and Pargar, the mountainous Sogdian settlements, as well as the Panjikent city itself show that fire worship was central at the “private space,” i.e. private dwellings as well.⁷⁹ There are differences in architectural styles, for the Gardani Hisor and Qum typically have two- or three-roomed dwellings, whereas in Pargar the construction style resembles the city architecture, and these styles are of course conditioned by the geographical positions of the settlements.⁸⁰ The Eternal Fire in the private homes was kept in “household fireplaces” built attached to the wall, which had dual functions: to heat the house (possibly also used to cook in the case of the mountain houses), as well as being a worship object at which the family could celebrate the rituals. In one of the examples in Panjikent city, it was noted that those households that had survived the invasion of 722 and continued to be inhabited had altered their fire altars by plastering over their décor and resizing them into regular ovens.⁸¹ In the subsequent centuries, when Islam was established, most of the rituals and beliefs of pre-Islamic Sogdians were still followed, albeit veneered with the Islamic traditions. One of the traditional rituals that has remained in observance is the Eternal Fire, which as shown by ethnographical research to be central in many significant “life-events” of the Central Asians.

Along with Zoroastrianism, which was the dominant faith amongst the Sogdians, Christianity

⁷⁸ Shkoda 2009, p. 99.

⁷⁹ Yakubov 1988.

⁸⁰ Yakubov 1979.

⁸¹ Rakhmatulloev 2006.

also had a significant presence. The exact timeline along which Christianity was disseminated in Sogdiana cannot be set out for certain. However, the surviving material and textual evidence suggests that by the sixth–seventh centuries it was already well established, and this appears to correspond to the elevation of Samarqand, the capital city of Sogdiana, to a metropolitanate. The primary sources disagree as to when this actually took place. Some sources place it as early as the fifth century under the Patriarch Ahai (410–414 CE), while some others point to a later period between the sixth and eighth centuries under the patriarchs Shila (503–523 CE), Isho'yahb — either Isho'yahb I (582–596 CE), Isho'yahb II (628–646 CE), or Isho'yahb III (650–658 CE) — and Saliba-Zakha (714–728 CE).⁸² The Eastern Syriac writers, such as Ibn al-Tayyib (1043 CE) and Abdisho bar Berikha (1290 CE) place the creation of the Samarqand metropolitanate between the sixth and eighth centuries.⁸³

Irrespective of the exact date of the establishment of the metropolitanate of Samarqand, the spread of Christianity into Sogdiana was integral to the overall mission of the Church of the East beyond the Iranian plateau. Second-century sources, notably the *Book of the Laws of the Countries*, by Bardaisan of Edessa, reveal that Christianity had reached Parthia and Bactria.⁸⁴ Whilst the origins and advent of Christianity in Sogdiana remain enigmatic, it is feasible to suggest that the region was part of this wider initiative of the Church of the East to spread the Christian faith further east. Some of the earliest reliable Syriac sources to allow some insight into the spread of Christianity into the wider geographical context of Sogdiana, are the records of the Synods held by the Church of the East, commencing with the Synod of Isaac in 410 CE.⁸⁵ Known by its French title, *Synodicon Orientale*, this source holds the signatures of the bishops and metropolitans who attended these synods — including those from Central Asian seats.

For the background history of Sogdian Christianity, one of the most interesting sources is the “Life of Baršabbā,” a document narrating the evangelization of Marv, a major city on the Sassanian border standing halfway to Bukhara, a major cultural center in Western Sogdiana.⁸ This document is

⁸² Colles 1986, pp. 51–57; Dauvillier 1948, pp. 283–286.

⁸³ Hoenerbach and Spies 1956–1957, p. 123.

⁸⁴ Drijvers 1965, pp. 59–61.

⁸⁵ Chabot 1902.

extant in two manuscripts unearthed at Turfan, in Sogdian.⁸⁶ In addition, the commemoration feast of Saint Baršabā in liturgy is attested in Syriac manuscript MIK III/45folios 7R-13R, which also was found in Turfan, together with other Sogdian Christian manuscripts. It is of interest to note that his commemoration date was joined with that of Mart Shir (perhaps a Persian Queen Shirin, who was patron of Christians?) and another female saint, Mart Zarvandokht, whose identity is not known.

The Sogdian fragment of the “Life of Siant Baršabbā” credits him with the foundation of monasteries in the areas of Fārs, Gorgān, Tūs, Abaršahr, Saraks, Marvrud, Balkh, Herat and Sīstān.⁸⁷ The activity of Baršabbā is also known from the accounts of the Muslim polymath al-Bīrūnī writing in the eleventh century who, in his text on the calendars of Christians, mentions the commemoration day of Baršabbā as a founder of Christianity in the region and indicates that Christianity was spread in the area two hundred years after Christ.⁸⁸

Although the historicity of Baršabbā as the first bishop of Marv is difficult to establish, a bishop under that name appears on the list of the signatories of the synod of Mar Dadišo in 424 CE.⁸⁹ Sebastian Brock in his examination of the Syriac sources for the “Life of Baršabbā” has concluded:

[T]he very existence of this Life of Baršabbā is of interest, since it shows that Baršabbā under two different names—Mar Šaba and Baršabbā—was venerated in subsequent centuries by all three Syriac ecclesial communities, Church of the East, Melkite and Syrian Orthodox.⁹⁰

The archaeological material discovered in the region of Marv confirms the significant presence of Christians in the area at least from the third century.⁹¹ The material evidence includes architectural

86 Müller and Lentz 1934, pp. 522–528, 559–564; Sundermann 1975, pp. 70–71, 73.

87 Sims-Williams 1989, p. 823.

88 Bīrūnī 1957, p. 330.

89 Chabot 1902, pp. 273, 276, 285.

90 Brock 1995, p. 201.

91 Koshelenko 1995, pp. 60–70.

structures, burial grounds and many small material culture objects, e.g. pendant crosses.⁹⁰ In light of the situation at Marv, where there was already a significant growth of Christian activity in the region starting from the third century, and the fact that the ecclesiastical see of Marv may have been represented in synods of the Church of the East from the 424 CE, it can be suggested that the Sogdians were evangelized no later than the fourth century.⁹²

In Sogdiana, the only definitely Christian architecture excavated to date is a church building excavated in the district of Urgut, located about 30 kilometers from Samarqand.⁹³ However, medieval sources have reported the existence of churches in Sogdiana. One such is Abu Bakr Narshakhi, a native of Bukhara writing in the early tenth century, and another is Marco Polo, in his travelogue *Oriente Poliano*. In addition, there are other material culture objects and numismatic data indicating the presence of Christianity and its influence in Sogdian society.⁹⁴ Beyond the excavated church in the Urgut district, the Christian "religious space" in Sogdian also includes a group of caves in the nearby mountain. There are three caves in which multiple inscriptions on their walls have been documented. The content of these inscriptions indicates that these caves were used for holding vigils and prayers by either monks or ordinary Christians. These inscriptions contain many personal names of Arabic, Syriac and Persian origin, which may be taken to point to the multilinguality of the Christian community there.⁹⁵

Traces of the religious activities of Sogdians and the existence of designated religious spaces is also evident from material and texts discovered in China. Sogdians in Chinese records and inscriptions are recognized by their Chinese family-names, which referenced the names of their native places in Sogdiana.⁹⁶ For example, Chinese sources refer to the Sogdians as representatives of Zhaowu jiuxing, literally, "the nine surnames of Zhaowu" or "Zhaowu consisting of nine surnames." This designation is understood to represent the names of nine polities or cities of Sogdiana: Samarkand (Kanguo 康國),

92 The first synodical record mentioning the bishop of Marv is found in Chabot 1902, pp. 285, 299, 310–311, 315; another two synodical records mentioning Marv are those of 486 and 497 CE.

93 Ashurov 2015, pp. 161–183; Ashurov 2018, pp. 1–42.

94 Ashurov 2018, pp. 1–40.

95 Dickens 2017, pp. 205–260.

96 Ikeda 1965, p. 61

Bukhārā (Anguo 安國), Sutrūshana or Ushrūsana (Dong Caoguo 東曹國), Kapūtānā (Caoguo 曹國), Ishītikhān (Xi Caoguo 西曹國), Māymurgh (Miguo 米國), Kushāniya (Heguo 何國), Kashāna (Shiguo 史國), Chāch (Shiguo 石國).⁹⁷ The religious ranks, and the monasteries or churches where Sogdians were prominent in China can be gleaned from the following epigraphic evidence:

1. The name He Yousuoyan appears in one of the land registers from about 640 CE of Xi Prefecture, Gaochang District.⁹⁸ The last name of this person denotes his place of origin as the town of Kushaniyah (Heguo 何國, located between Samarqand and Bukhara) and his given name, Yousuoyan, according to Yoshida, is the middle Chinese transcription (**jǐu šīwo ĭän*) of the Sogdian Yišō'-yān, meaning 'favored by, or gift of Jesus'.⁹⁹ Wang Ding has pointed out the possible connection of this name with Manichaeism;¹⁰⁰ however, considering the fact that Chinese sources inform us of the official introduction of the Manichean religion during the rule of the unpopular empress Wu (684–704 CE) and the official ban on the religion after the translation of its texts in 731 CE, it is more probable that He Yousuoyan was a Sogdian Christian, since at this time Christianity still enjoyed imperial support.¹⁰¹
2. The name An Yena 安野那, known from a grave epitaph from Guilin 桂林, southern China. The family name, An, indicates that the native home of this person was Bukhara. This Christian from Bukhara died during the Jinglong 景龍 era (707–710 CE).¹⁰²
3. The name of the monk Siyuan of Maimurg, known from the grave epitaph of his father, Mi Jifen 米繼芬 (714–805 CE). Not much is known about this Sogdian monk. However, as Ge Chengyong

⁹⁷ More recent discussion of the “Zhaowu” is found in Yoshida 2003, pp. 35–67.

⁹⁸ As Wang Ding 2006, pp. 151, notes, this name occurs twice.

⁹⁹ Wang Ding 2006, pp. 151 (in the footnote), supplies examples of the personal names with the theophoric prefix Yišō found in Manichean manuscripts. The possibility of the Yišō'-yān name being Manichean, according to Wang Ding, is indicated by the fact the name was found in the margin of the Buddhist manuscript.

¹⁰⁰ Wang Ding 2006, pp. 151.

¹⁰¹ A concise historical survey of Manichaeism in Central Asia and China, including bibliographic references, is found in Lieu 1998.

¹⁰² Jiang 1994.

in his study of the epitaph demonstrated, the fact that Mi Jifen's son was a monk implies that his household, that is, the father and other siblings, were Christian too.¹⁰³

4. The Luoyang commemorative stele mentions five Christians of Sogdian descent.¹⁰⁴ These are:
 - a. "the deceased mother, the lady of the An 安 family from Bukhārā"¹⁰⁵
 - b. "the mother's brother An Shaolian 安少連"¹⁰⁶
 - c. "[the clergyman] of the Da Qin 大秦 Monastery: Xuanying 玄應, Harmony of the Doctrine, head of the monastery, whose secular family name is Mi 米"¹⁰⁷
 - d. [the clergyman] "Xuanqing 玄慶, Great Virtue of Respect-Inspiring Deportment, whose secular family name is Mi"¹⁰⁸
 - e. [the clergyman] "Zhitong 志通, Great Virtue of the Nine Grades, whose secular family name is Kang 康"¹⁰⁹

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this survey is to show the plurality of evidence demonstrating the multi-religious fabric of Sogdian culture. Various religious practices were brought to Sogdiana from the countries lying to the west and were further transmitted by Sogdians and other nations traveling on the trade routes toward the east into China. Existing material evidence, including texts and architectural and natural remains exhibiting a definite religious outlook, points to the localized character of these religions with designated spaces dedicated for worship, pilgrimage and memorializing. The religious practices and religious spaces were an important part of the urban and social development within the Sogdian

¹⁰³ Ge Chengyong 2001, pp. 181–186; annotated English translation at Ge and Nicolini-Zan 2004, pp. 181–196.

¹⁰⁴ A full study of the Luoyang stele is found in Nicolini-Zan 2009, pp. 99–140.

¹⁰⁵ Nicolini-Zan 2009, p. 116.

¹⁰⁶ Nicolini-Zan 2009, p. 118.

¹⁰⁷ Nicolini-Zan 2009, p. 118.

¹⁰⁸ Nicolini-Zan 2009, p. 118.

¹⁰⁹ Nicolini-Zan 2009, p. 118.

communities, whether in their homeland or in diaspora settlements. As the evidence shows, in China Christian Sogdians represented themselves as members of the Christian monastic orders or by the other professions they held. They built and commemorated their faith through specific religious articles distinct from those of other religions.

Material evidence of certain religions in Sogdiana proper, such as Buddhism, is absent, but its presence in diaspora Sogdian settlements can be interpreted as this religion transiting from one locality and gaining a foothold in another. The reasons it was popular outside the Zerafshan Valley remain uncertain, but the abundant evidence of its popularity west of Sogdiana, in Bactria and Tokharistan, suggests the existence of contacts and networks. The literary Manichean monuments in Sogdian from Chinese Turkestan similarly pose intriguing questions. Was Manicheism practiced in Sogdiana proper? Can traces of Manichean faith be found there? Certainly, the Christian texts show that there was religious dialogue between the members of these two religions.¹¹⁰ Or one could see the Manichean influence in Sogdian art, such as mural painting. It is clear that, in contrast to the Manicheans, who fully absorbed and thoroughly integrated their teachings with Buddhist and Christian apocryphal writings or practices, finding the physical spaces of this religion poses difficulty. This is sharply contrasted with Christians, who remained aloof from this pluralistic religious atmosphere. This is particularly evident in the linguistic borrowings observed in Sogdian Christian texts (mainly from Syriac). Further, there are terms that were possibly loaned from Manichaeism or Buddhism, but which are bound to polemical contexts. For example, the expression *qrm*- 'evil deeds, fate' (which is etymologically Indian, i.e. *karma*) is found only in the Christian polemic against the Manicheans. Accordingly, dictated by its context of use as well as the fact that it is not attested anywhere else in Sogdian Christian texts, this term is probably directly borrowed from Manichean usage.¹¹¹

Despite the strong influence of Manichean, Christian and Buddhist traditions, the Zoroastrian faith in Sogdiana and in diaspora remained strong. The temples and family chapels in private homes demonstrate strong communal commitment as well as the private nature of practices. The idols of

¹¹⁰ Sims-Williams 2003, p. 404.

¹¹¹ Sims-Williams 2003, p. 404. The complete list of other Indian terms with their Buddhist vocabulary equivalents attested in Sogdian Christian texts is found in Sims-Williams 1983, p. 140.

deities were designed to be moved both in public spaces and in private homes, and these depictions were made to celebrate the rituals. It was the Islamic conquest that brought gradual demise to the historical faith of the Sogdian people, although many of its elements were incorporated into the new Islamic traditions and practices in subsequent centuries.

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